

"Big Lou" brings Texas BBQ, style to Camas restaurant

I have to admit, the first time my family and I walked into Big Lou's BBQ in Camas I was suspicious. It had nothing to do with the atmosphere, which has a Texas outdoors feel with bold red, white and blue colors representing the large state's flag. My boys loved the feel of the place. My suspicions had nothing to do with the proprietors, who are kind, sweet, gentle, people with Texas accents. And believe me, it had nothing to do with the sweet smell of mesquite coming from the giant smoker in front of the tiny eatery.

My suspicions had everything to do with taste and texture. Being a Texas native, I'm a qualified (how's that for modesty?) taster and tester of Texas eats. My father and uncles (I have five of them) are all award-winning Texas cooks. They all have these barrel smokers, which are literally metal barrels cut in half and custom-rigged to make perfect meat smokers.

Before I ordered my first beef brisket dinner, everything looked, felt and smelled right. The atmosphere was good. The people were great. And the smell was fabu-

lous. I told my wife I felt like I was at a Texas backyard barbecue. The only thing missing was my dozens of cousins. That's the only other place in the country where Geigenmillers gather en masse. Anyway, back to Big Lou's.

I even told the server: "This better be good. I know what Texas BBQ tastes like." I didn't want to be disappointed. I'd been to a dozen Texas BBQ eateries where the owner talked big, but lacked a Texas accent, and lacked the right Texas recipes. I wasn't in the mood for any counterfeits.

You see, everything is bigger in Texas. Everything tastes better there. I don't understand it. It's just the way it is. If you've ever lived in Texas, or spent any time at all, you know what I mean.

The barbecue sauce had the taste of a special blend. Superb.

The spare ribs were also tender and had been marinated to perfection. Liz, the ribs expert, gave me a thumbs up. The sausage is spicy, which is what I'm used to, but it may be an acquired taste for others.

The pinto beans are a cross between chili and Mexican beans. The beans have a bite to them but aren't what I would call full-blown "chili." I'm sure this is by design as not to detract from Big Lou's perfectly cooked mesquite-smoked meats. The potato salad is scrumptious, and reminded me of my Aunt Dobbie's old recipe.

It's always great to eat your brisket fresh from the smoker, but I always recommend saving a portion of your meal for the next day, or even two days out. The mesquite settles in, and the meat tastes even better, heated or not. In fact, a cold beef brisket sandwich smothered in BBQ sauce makes for a great lunch. Tell your friends.

As we sat and enjoyed our tremendous meal, owner and operator Louis "Big Lou" Caplovitz, a short, stout, charming middle-aged man, introduced himself, as he always does. He's real good with children and is an excellent host. He asked what we thought of the meal, and I explained I was pleased, and gave him a bit of my background. In fact, the more time I spent with him, the more I started talking with an accent, and start saying

"y'all" this and "y'all" that. I love it!

So how did Big Lou's get started?

"I've been cooking for my friends for more than 30 years," said Lou. "It started as a backyard thing, and when you smoke meat, it's an all day process, so it becomes a social event in Texas, it's a celebration."

And then it became an ego thing.

"With my Texas ego, I had to show people up," he said.

The Texan from Houston took a while to develop his rub (that's what you put on the meat) and over time he mastered the mesquite-cooking process.

His journey to Big Lou's actually started with Reynolds Corporation. In 1983, he went to work for Reynolds as a sales representative. Over time, his employment shifted to Alcoa, and he moved his family from Texas to Washington. In 2001 he was "downsized."

Shortly thereafter he opened an open-air barbecue stop in Hazel Dell and operated that for six months. The Big Lou's we know today opened shop in August 2002.

"I used some inheritance money, some retirement savings and renovated this place - it just fit the bill," he said.

The place is an old corner drive-thru milk store on 3rd Avenue in Camas just before the police station. It's a perfect place for a great idea.

Getting any business started is tricky. Restaurants are even trickier—they have a 70 percent failure rate.

Lou said location is essential. "Then you have to get financing together, and learn how the city government works," he said.

His advice to small biz wannabes: "Go into it with your eyes wide open. Understand the ups and downs. Be patient as there will be a down time, and have a business plan in place.

Lou's strengths are quality interactions with people and knowledge of dealing with vendors — traits that help small business owners get off the ground.

Lou, his wife Phyllis and their staff of six work hard Monday through Saturday 11 a.m.–8 p.m. They also cater to events and businesses. Give them a call at 360.834.4114.

So, why should people come to Big Lou's?

"Come here for great quality food, in a down home atmosphere," said Lou. "You will truly feel and have good memories that the barbecue you ate is just like the last time you were in Texas."